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The Super-Secret CIA

It is not often that the Senate indulges in such healthy debate over a Presidential appointment as it did in the case of John A. McCone, director of the Central Intelligence Agency.

When there is controversy over a President's choice for high government post, it usually is political. Not in this case. All 12 of the votes against confirming the McCone appointment were cast by Democrats, and some of those were based on extraneous reasons.

Our impression of Mr. McCone's abilities is decidedly favorable. So the Senate's decision to approve him seems to us correct.

But we were especially impressed by the argument made by the chief dissenter, Sen. Eugene McCarthy of Minnesota: That the CIA, under the present system, is under practically no surveillance at all by Congress.

As we understood him, the Senator was not necessarily opposed to the McCone appointment. He was opposed to any man holding that job without the Senate having a more complete knowledge of his detailed views on national policy—so long as Congress, or at least a responsible committee of Congress, does not have a constant review of the manner in which the CIA is operating, and how well it is carrying out its purpose.

The CIA has been described as second only to the President in power and importance. Yet it operates in almost complete secrecy—not only from the public, but from Congress. It writes its own ticket. Its budget is secret—even the total. Its personnel is secret.

No one is proposing that the CIA function in a goldfish bowl, but what Sen. McCarthy, among others, proposes is a joint committee of Congress to keep tabs on the agency, as similar committees do in other areas.

Our intelligence, gathered and evaluated by the CIA, is the basis for much of our foreign policy. Or should be. It is the basis for military decisions. Or should be. Congress has a heavy duty in those areas. Congress ought to know what's going on.